



# Teaching reading

Children with Down syndrome have a specific learning profile with known areas of strengths and difficulties. One key area of strength is the ability to learn using visuals, including the written word. Reading is therefore an area of **strength** for many children with Down syndrome.

Reading is an important, useful and practical skill for children with Down syndrome to learn. It enables them to access the curriculum, improves articulation and spontaneous speech, whilst also teaching grammar and sentence structure. Furthermore, reading helps improve working memory and negates the need for children to rely on auditory learning, both of which are areas children with Down syndrome can have some difficulty. Lastly, but not least, being able to read helps to bolster children's self-esteem.

Children with Down syndrome can start to learn to read when they have a **receptive** vocabulary of approximately 50-100 words and can select and match picture to picture or object to object. This means that many children with Down syndrome

can begin to learn to read at around 2 years old. Most schools now use a phonic approach to teach reading, but this can present a difficulty for children with Down syndrome, as using phonics requires a child to discriminate sounds, decode words and have problem solving skills, which are all hard to do for children who have Down syndrome.

Instead, to begin with, reading should be taught using the **whole word** recognition strategy. This approach utilises children's excellent visual learning skills and relies on memorisation and repeated exposure to the words. It skips the decoding process which children with Down syndrome find tricky and relies on children remembering the word by sight in its whole form.

# Step 1



## Introducing matching

Once the child can understand 50-100 spoken words, begin by playing games, and matching everyday objects or familiar photographs. Photographs of family members can be a great place to start.



# Step 2



## Word-to-word matching

Move on to word-to-word matching games. It is important that the words chosen have meaning to the child to give them context. You could again use family members, or favourite toys or items of clothing. It does not matter how long or short the word is as it is being learnt as a whole word, and not phonetically. In fact, some words with unusual 'shapes' (eg Xylophone) may in fact be easier to remember for some children. It is usual to begin with nouns and move on to verbs later.

Make a lotto board with the 2-4 word choices on accompanied by a relevant picture (examples at end). Photographs are preferable to drawings. Make a copy of each word. To play the games, show the child the lotto board with words and

pictures and then place one of the words in front of the child and name it eg "Teddy." Encourage the child, hand over hand if necessary, to match the cut out word to the same word on the lotto board, then give lots of praise. Repeat the activity with the other words on the board remembering to keep praising the child as you progress.

This should be played daily for 5-10 minutes until the pictures can be removed and child can match word to word with no picture prompts. It is helpful at this point to rearrange the lotto board words so that the same word is not always in the same place to ensure the child is remembering the word and not just its position on the board.

# Step 3



## Match, select, name

The next stage is Match, Select, Name.

Ask the child to match a word card you give to them to the corresponding word card.

Eg, “Put Teddy with Teddy” (show word card for Teddy).

Ask the child to select a word you have requested and give it to you, “Give me Teddy.”

Ask the child to name a card for you “What does this say?” (show the word card). When a child can do this they are reading.

## Extending

It is useful to begin to make simple books for children using their own friends, family, and experiences, such as going to a football match with Dad, having Sunday lunch at Grandma’s, and playing on the swings. Photographs can be used, and simple sentences written to the child’s keyword level plus one put underneath. This encourages children to start to begin to sentence build and introduces them to the more abstract high-frequency words such as I, to, and, the.

Action books using the child, family and friends can also be made at this stage to introduce verbs. Eg. Daddy is sitting (picture of dad sat on chair). Continue to introduce new words through the pictures and lotto boards and the match, select, name method, and keep a record of all the words children can already read (revising these words every so often is a good idea, use them in the books that you make to read with your child).

As the child gets more and more proficient at learning new words, introduce more of the high-frequency words from the Dolch word list.

Despite the difficulties children with Down syndrome can have in learning phonics, many will go on to develop a level of phonological knowledge useful to their reading and spelling, however, this usually happens later than in typically developing peers and the phonic ability also varies greatly from child to child. Without having a sight vocabulary, children’s reading progress may slow or completely stop.

Some research shows that many pupils with Down syndrome begin to have more phonological awareness at around year 4 or when they reach the reading skills of an 8-year-old. Although a huge number of words can be taught by sight, there will come a point when a child finds a word that they have not encountered before, and so will use their decoding skills at that point to work it out. Phonics should therefore not be discarded and should be taught alongside logographic / sight reading, but not at the same time of day.

## Other activities

- ▶ Look for the sight words a child is learning in the story books you are reading together, draw the child's attention to the word in the book eg "Look, mummy!" or "Look, football" etc. Repeated exposure to the words is important.
- ▶ Stick up the words being learnt around the home or classroom, when a child spots a word ask them to name it and put it in a post box or hide it again for you or a peer to find next time. Alternatively, put up two sets of words or a set of words and corresponding pictures and ask the children to hunt for the matches around the room.
- ▶ At a later stage, you could ask a child to put the word found into a simple sentence, phrase or instruction, or if they are verb cards to do the action written down eg jumping.

## Useful resources

- ▶ See and Learn Language and Reading
- ▶ Special Words and Special Stories app.
- ▶ Reading and Language Intervention (RLI)



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## Examples from See and Learn





**Dad is sleeping.**



**Mum is running**



**Grandma is cooking.**



**Kate is painting.**



**We went to Blackpool.**



**I wore a pink hat.**



**We walked to the beach.**



**We ate ice cream.**